

## 1. GERMAN BORDER CONTROLS : BARK , BITE , OR BOTH ?

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Ημ. Έκδοσης: . . . 22/09/2024 Ημ. Αποδελτίωσης: . . . 22/09/2024

Σελίδα: . . . . . 16

Innews AE - Αποδελτίωση Τύπου - <http://www.innews.gr>



# German Border Controls: Bark, Bite, or Both?

Germany is home to the 4th-largest refugee population globally and the highest number of asylum seekers in the EU. Will its border control measures have a real impact or are they just political optics?

By Cheryl Novak

All eyes were on Germany Monday morning as the country rolled out its new border controls. Many feared widespread disruptions in and around the country, yet by mid-week, the measures appear to be more 'bark' than 'bite'. Meanwhile, Germany insists important 'work' is being done.

Germany's unilateral decision to enforce nationwide border controls from September 16, 2024 to March 15, 2025 is aimed at reducing irregular migration, according to Interior Minister Nancy Faeser. "We want to further reduce irregular migration, stop people smugglers, put a stop to criminals, and recognize and stop Islamists at an early stage," Faeser explained.

However, given Germany's sprawling 3,800-kilometer border with nine neighboring countries—and the roads, paths and train routes that crisscross them—many were left wondering how the country could manage such extensive controls effectively.

### Germany's Border Controls: Not New, But Expanded

Germany already conducted controls on its border with Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria and Switzerland, so this new announcement essentially expanded them to the entire border.

Moreover, in response to assertions made by media and analysts that Germany's move calls into question the future of the Schengen, an article in *The Times of London* points out that temporary border controls have been imposed within the zone 442 times over the past nine years, including during major events like the Paris Olympics.

### What's Changed?

With the announcement, Germany's police now have the right to conduct checks that are "targeted, adapted to the situation and flexible in terms of location and time," according to a German border guard interviewed by German media station DW, who stressed that these were not "across-the-board" measures.

The same border guard told DW that a strict policing of border crossings would be impossible, as there are insuf-



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ficient resources, and undesirable, because it would be too disruptive for local society and businesses.

Still, Germany's announcement does mean that its border guards now have to right to stop any vehicle or person they consider 'suspicious.' Whether or not the new policy will lead to racial profiling and complaints over discrimination has yet to be seen.

### Germany Claims Early Successes

Faeser has defended the move, stating that similar measures in the east and south of the country have already yielded results. Since October last year, Germany has reportedly denied entry to 30,000 individuals, reduced asylum applications by 20%, and increased deportations of migrants without legal status.

Early reports suggest that irregular migrants have already been intercepted since the new controls were enacted, although details about their subsequent handling remain scarce.

The real test of the policy will be whether it results in tangible reductions in irregular migration, or simply shifts the problem to border crossings that are less closely monitored.

Reading between the lines, according to ELIAMEP's Senior Research Fellow, Angeliki Dimitriadi, Germany is also targeting secondary movement and hoping to reduce the

amount it pays out to refugees and asylum seekers in benefits.

### Bigger Picture: Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Irregular Migrants

In many ways, Germany is facing a situation similar to Greece, with both countries claiming they shoulder an unfair share of Europe's migration burden. The Migration and Asylum Pact passed by the European Union in 2023 seeks to address this imbalance. How effective it will be remains to be seen, since it has not yet been implemented.

Germany hosts one of the world's largest refugee populations, with its 2.33 million refugees representing 2.8% of the country's total population of 83.3 million, according to UNHCR. It also handles the highest number of asylum seekers in the EU with Germany receiving 31.4% of all first-time asylum applications in the EU in 2023—a total of 329,000 compared to Greece's 57,900.

Across the EU, irregular migration grew by 18% in 2023 to a total of 385,445 crossings, though it still represents a relatively small proportion of overall migration.

Meanwhile FRONTEX reports that irregular migration fell 30% in the first eight months of 2024. That said, crossings surged by 193% in regions like Europe's eastern land border, while the eastern Mediterranean witnessed a 39% increase.

A German police officer stands guard next to a dog at a border with France in Kehl, Germany, September 16, 2024.

### Political Implications

Germany's move to reintroduce border controls has arrived against the backdrop of a rise in extreme right-wing political movements, underscored by the far right's electoral victory in Germany—its first in the post-war period. This shift has forced the government to address migration concerns head-on.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz argues that the border controls are within the bounds of European law, though he did acknowledge that Germany is "making maximum use" of its legal options—hinting that even Germany realizes their move was extreme.

Though migration isn't officially on the agenda for the next European Council meeting in October, Germany's move has reignited discussions behind the scenes, with several European leaders pushing for migration to be brought back to the forefront of EU policy debates.

Germany has already dispelled Greece's fears that the new border controls will increase migrant returns to the latter, removing some urgency from the issue, but regardless, Athens is sure to welcome the renewed focus on migration, an issue it has long argued warrants more attention from Europe.